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‘Barbarisme and obdurate wilfulness’: Agricultural Materialism, Animal Welfare and Irish Studies¹

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Opening the Field

In dialogue with Joep Leerssen, Guy Beiner claims that *The New History of Ireland* marginalized antiquarian and folklorist studies.² Beiner was building on previous comments about the ‘professionalization of Irish history’ being ‘grounded in the debunking of popular “mythology,”’ with the effect that a crucial dimension, oral tradition, was downplayed or dismissed.³ Scholars ignore this evidence on practices and pastimes, deeming it amateurish, nationalistic, or subjective.⁴ In what follows, I take one agricultural custom in Ireland—‘ploughing by the tail’—and survey responses by anthropologists, antiquarians, archaeologists, ethnologists, geographers, historians and creative writers. Uncovering fault lines in early modern Irish history, extending forward through the centuries, and working at the intersection of different fields of study, I focus on how critics – polemicists, historians of the seventeenth-century, experts in animal studies, scholars of husbandry – responded to a farming method condemned by colonists, but contextualized by those familiar with animal welfare, animal warfare and agricultural history. In tracing this practice – background, prohibition, afterlife – I harness multiple cross-disciplinary responses, including what I call ‘agricultural materialism,’ pushing beyond colonial ideology towards an understanding of environmental factors in the broadest sense. In this particular case I aim to show that an Irish agricultural practice condemned as barbaric had its roots not only in a resourceful response to a culture of conflict and economic hardship, nor merely in an act of resistance to colonial power, but in a workable and workaday solution to the challenges of rough terrain and farm animals limited in the weight they could bear.

Cultural Materialism has two strands, one from American anthropologist Marvin Harris – who coined the term – and the other from Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams. Both drew on historical materialism, developed by Engels out of Marx’s materialist conception of history. For Harris, ‘cultural materialism ... directs attention to the interaction between behaviour and environment as mediated by the human organism and its cultural apparatus.’⁵ Crucially, this approach ‘opposes numerous strategies that set forth from words, ideas, high moral values, and aesthetic and religious beliefs to understand the everyday events of ordinary human life’ by, among other things, looking at ‘ecological variables.’⁶ For Williams, it is ‘a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism.’⁷ Famously, for Marx and Engels, humans ‘distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence.’⁸ Agricultural materialism foregrounds the part played by animals in social transformation, interrogates the problematic separation of humans into productive and unproductive categories within colonial discourse, and charts the representation of farming practices across periods and borders.

I first used the term ‘agricultural materialism’ to refer to material aspects of ‘planting’ in reviewing a book on Edmund Spenser’s pastoralism.⁹ My purpose here is to challenge colonial moralizing by homing in on criticism cognizant of the material culture of farming practices and the relevant environmental factors facing early modern natives (and settlers). In doing so, I offer an approach that present and future scholars may pursue and apply to other colonialist and cultural images, in this case utilizing but also extending the field of Animal Studies, which thrives in early modern scholarship though not yet fully in Ireland, and is not always alert to the hypocrisy of humanitarian claims in a colonial context. Part of a larger project, this essay will chart the practice’s progress beyond legal and historical debate, tracking its literary impact through early modern playwrights, Romantic novelists, and contemporary poets.

The Path to Prohibition

In 1634, Thomas Wentworth, lord deputy of Ireland, ‘gave Order unto his Majesty’s learned Counsel...for restraining the barbarous Customs of Plowing by the Tail.’¹⁰ Wentworth’s act is considered the earliest animal welfare legislation in the English-speaking world, and Piers Beirne has plotted its impact in immense detail.¹¹ William Brereton’s 1635 visit to Dublin Castle suggests that Wentworth’s own concern for horses was thoroughgoing, with the Lord Deputy having ‘erected a gallant stately stable as any I have seen in the King’s dominions; it is a double stable, there being a strong wall in the middle, to either side, whereof stand the horses’ heads.’¹² The context is complex, however. The legislative background suggests this was more about colonial exploitation than humane practice.¹³ For example, we can trace Wentworth’s legislation from a 1606 Act of Council.¹⁴ William Pinkerton, in an essay in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, also reminds us that Wentworth’s act began as Jacobean policy. James I alluded in 1620 to ploughing by the tail as a ‘barbarous custome commonly used in the Northerne parts.’¹⁵

Earlier English writers denounced the practice. Barnaby Rich listed ‘loathsome observations...used by the Irish...but especially in the ploughing of their land...every horse by his owne taile.’¹⁶ According to Fynes Moryson, the Irish ‘draw carts and like things...by a withe to the tails of their horses, and to the rumps when the tails be pulled off, which had been forbidden by laws, yet could never be altered.’¹⁷ Financial gain and cultural improvement went hand-in-hand. Outlawing ploughing by the tail generated income through fines. The practice also generated outrage, since shorn of its local context it could be held up as proof of the barbarity typical of a backward society. Settlers were required to plough in the English manner using a harness.¹⁸ Even so, Pilib Ó Mórdha notes that Hugh O’Reilly,

granted land in Cavan, violated the conditions of the Articles of Plantation, having ‘made no estates but from year to year, and all his tenants do plough by the tail.’¹⁹

This injunction, as we shall see, did not take into account the lighter breed of Irish horses. Whereas in England heavier horses bred for warfare had found their way into farming, in Ireland smaller steeds were common. Thomas Blundeville admired their slightness: ‘The Iryshe Hobby is a pretye fyne horse.’²⁰ Robert Payne observed: ‘Their chiefe horsses are of as great price as in England, but carthorsses mares, and little hackneyes are of very small price.’²¹ Gervase Markham censured Ireland’s loose horse husbandry: ‘That your Mares which you preserue for your studd should runne wilde and vntamed, as I haue seene them doe in...*Ireland*...I vtterly dislike...such wildnesse indangers them as oft as they are driuen...from ground to ground.’²² John Langdon suggested England’s ‘selective breeding programmes to produce large horses for warfare ... perhaps ... rubbed off onto agricultural horses.’²³ According to Edward Wentworth, ‘types suitable as chargers, chariot animals, and bearers of armor were identified long before those desirable for saddle transportation, cartage, plow, and racing were set apart.’²⁴

Native protests that the practice was commensurate with the quality of Irish soil fell on deaf ears. The 1613 commission of inquiry into the state of Ireland declared: ‘Although divers of the natives pretend a necessity to continue the said manner of ploughing, as more fit for stony and mountainous ground, yet we are of opinion it is not fit to be continued.’²⁵ William Lithgow’s 1619 sojourn decried as perverse ‘Ploughes drawne by Horse-tayles, wanting harnesse,’ and ‘onely fastned with straw, or wooden Ropes to their bare Rumps, marching all side for side, three or foure in a ranke, and as many men hanging by the ends of that untoward Labour.’ It was ‘as bad a husbandry...as ever I found among the wildest Savages alive,’ especially since ‘the *Irish* have thousands of both Kingdomes daily labouring beside them, yet...will not learne to use harnesse, as they doe in *England*, so obstinate and

perverse they are in their Barbarous consuetude.’ Despite these injunctions, couched in a familiar colonialist metaphor, and while ‘punishment and penalties were inflicted,’ most husbandmen were ‘content to pay twenty shillings a yeare, before they will change their custome.’²⁶ Opposition to Wentworth’s act was swift.²⁷ Its repeal appeared as item 4 among ‘Additional Propositions’ by Confederate Catholics in 1644, and as item 19 of thirty articles of peace drawn up by Ormond in 1646.²⁸

In the most quoted passage of *Observations upon the articles of peace made with the Irish Rebels* (1649), John Milton responded to article 22 of Ormond’s articles of peace which sought to repeal Wentworth’s act against ploughing by the tail, characterising this proposal as ‘more ridiculous then dangerous.’ For Milton, the practice proved the Irish were ‘averse from all Civility and amendment...who rejecting the ingenuity of all other Nations to improve and waxe more civill by a civilizing Conquest, though all these many yeares better shown and taught, [preferred] their own absurd and savage Customes before the most convincing evidence of reason and demonstration: a testimony of their true Barbarisme and obdurate wilfulnesse to be expected no lesse in other matters of greatest moment.’²⁹ Most Milton scholars, confronted with this passage, only scratch the surface. Merritt Hughes is an exception. For Hughes, Wentworth’s act reflected English self-interest: ‘the famous Twenty-second Article ... insulted Parliament’s authority over popular mores and economics at points where English civilizing pretensions in Ireland had long been sorely challenged.’³⁰ Thomas Corns argues that Milton deftly plays upon what he assumes to be his readers’ sense of national superiority,’ by asserting that ‘Such a practice, besides being cruel (not a point Milton makes), could be perceived as evidence of primitivism,’ since ‘who but a savage couldn’t manufacture a functional collar, especially after he’d seen one being used? And proof, too, of idiocy: who but a fool would ruin a good horse by mistreating it in this way?’³¹ Corns blithely endorses the view of the practice as barbaric, unnecessary and harmful to

horses. Joad Raymond, on the other hand, seeks to rationalize Milton's statement and disconnect it from Drogheda when he argues that 'Milton professed shock not only at the savagery of a culture that...attached a plough to a horse's tail, but at the stupidity of a people that continued to do so even after having had demonstrated to them the principle of the neck collar.' For Raymond, 'Though this passage has been read as a literal expression of Milton's personal hatred of the Irish and a call for their extirpation, Milton was objecting to the repeal of Caroline, not republican policy, a compromise, and the only one of its kind in the Articles ...wrested from Charles's representative in return for military support.' Indeed, 'Despite the name-calling, Milton remained relatively unexercised on the Irish, as if their shortcomings could be left unsaid.'³²

They were not left 'unsaid.' Milton's anti-Irish sentiments go back to 1641, when he railed against 'these murderous Irish the enemies of God and mankind, a cursed off-spring.'³³ Piers Beirne's ground-breaking essay tamely accepts Raymond's claim that '[t]hat Milton would not have supported Cromwell's slaughter of the Irish.'³⁴ But in fact Milton cries out for 'Justice to avenge the dead' and exaggerates the 1641 victims beyond any contemporary, accusing the Irish of shedding 'the bloud of more then 200000...Subjects.'³⁵ In 'Milton's Reformed Animals,' Karen Edwards says of his attack on article 22 that 'the vehemence with which Milton...condemns the practice suggests...he regards it as another Irish "crime."³⁶

Other seventeenth-century writers also protested the custom. Richard Bolton included the practice under 'abuses and enormities tending to...prejudice of the Common-wealth.'³⁷ Thomas Waring considered the natives 'meerly a kind of *Reptilia*, things creeping on their bellies, and feeding on the dust of the earth.' Waring's comment on article 22 – 'O ridiculous indulgence and servill compliances' – confirms his dehumanising rhetoric.³⁸ Meanwhile, the practice continued. In a convoluted passage in his *Essay upon the advancement of trade in Ireland* (1673), William Temple – son of Sir John, author of *The Irish Rebellion* (1646), the

theory to which Drogheda was the practice – demonstrated how proscription of this practice could turn a handsome profit for the crown, as ‘Statutes against that barbarous custom of Plowing by the tayl, ought to be renewed,’ and ‘a Tax might be laid upon every Horse of draught throughout the Kingdom, which...would encrease the Kings Revenue by one of the easiest ways that is any where in use.’³⁹

David Norbrook, observing that English republicans such as Milton ‘tended to find in Ireland the epitome of everything that was backward,’ cites an earlier letter from Sir Cheney Culpeper to Samuel Hartlib on 17 February 1646, which states that ‘I see in the generalitie of mens dispositions...an analogicall Irishe humor which nothing but an acte of [parliament] can breake from drawinge by the horses tayle.’ The practice thus becomes a metaphor for stubbornness or ‘obdurate wilfulnesse.’⁴⁰ But the Hartlib Circle’s angle on husbandry is more complex. ‘A Large letter concerning the Defects and Remedies of English Husbandry’ prefixed to *Samuel Hartlib his legacie* (1651), sometimes attributed to Robert Child, pleads for a new invention to ‘*facilitate* the going of the *Plough* and lighten our ordinary *Carriages*.’⁴¹ The author laments the variety of methods used for ploughing in ‘every *Countrey*, yea almost every *County*,’ in the absence of any standardized technique: ‘Some with wheels, others without; some turning the *Rest* (as they call it) as in *Kent*, *Picardy* and *Normandy*), others not; some having *Coulters* of one fashion, others of another; others as the *Dutch*, having an Iron wheele or circle for that purpose; some having their *sheares* broad at point; some not; some being round, as in *Kent*, others flat; some tying their horses by the taile, as in *Ireland*.’⁴² Here the sense of what is progressive is unclear, and absent is the note of condemnation directed specifically at Ireland. But characteristic of the Hartlib Circle is the strenuous pursuit of standardisation and the frustration with national and regional differences.

Tailgate

Later antiquarians picked up on the custom and varied their denunciation and description. These writers were visitors and scholars rather than settlers and investors, which afforded a degree of detachment. English antiquary Thomas Dineley is a case in point. Better known for his reflections on Wales, Dineley's 1680 tour of Ireland remarks of the barony of Burren, County Clare:

Here Horses 4 abreast draw the Plough by the Tayles, which was the custome all over Ireland, untill a Statute forbad it. Yett they are tollerated this custome here because they cannot mannage their land otherwise, their Plough Geers, tackle, and traces being [...] of Gadds or withs of twiggs twisted, which here would break to pieces by the Plough Share so often jutting against the Rock, which, the Geers being fastened by wattles or wispes the horses being sensible stop untill the Plowman lifts it over.⁴³

Dineley's eye for detail and eagerness to interpret rather than condemn goes against the grain of earlier commentators. Indeed, the nineteenth-century note on this passage by Robert O'Brien concludes:

It is curious that...in the treaty of March 25, 1646, between the Supreme Council of the Confederates and Lord Ormond, it was provided that...prohibiting ploughing by the horses' tails...should be repealed, proving what a hold these customs had taken, when such great issues were at stake at that moment.⁴⁴

The great issues at stake included ploughing by the tail itself, a key locus of cultural and economic contestation, since that particular practice was bound up with land use and land ownership at the heart of the Anglo-Irish conflict in the period. As Toby Barnard remarked:

‘Since by the end of the seventeenth century what was at stake for the Catholic Irish... was whether they were to own lands at all, the niceties about how they should be laid out and cultivated looked crassly inappropriate. The English might garden while the Irish starved.’⁴⁵

Horses were a vital resource whose value went beyond husbandry, and in Ireland they assumed a special symbolism. According to Maria Pramaggiore: ‘The horse has served as a metaphor for validating and renegotiating Irish identities from the middle ages... to late twentieth-century popular culture.’⁴⁶ Ulf Dantanus insists on the particularity of equine Ireland and its impact on literature.⁴⁷ Seizure for military purposes, for example, was common. Gavin Robinson’s study of the part played by horses in the conflicts of the mid-seventeenth century makes this point clear: ‘As the wars continued, horses were increasingly taken from anyone who had them.’⁴⁸ Long after large-scale seizure of horses in England had ceased, the practice persisted in Ireland, with the Lord Lieutenant in 1715 ordering justices of the peace ‘to seize and take all serviceable horses, geldings and mares ... found in the possession of any papist.’⁴⁹ Irish horses were in demand for sport as well as war. During Cromwell’s ban on horseracing Ireland was exempt.⁵⁰

Historians often fail to provide context for Irish customs, accepting at face value the claims of colonial commentators. In *The Siege of Derry*, for example, Patrick Macrory writes:

arable farming [...] was carried on by methods which seemed primitive by English standards. There were no enclosed fields and the Irish, to the horrified indignation of the English, ‘ploughed by the tail.’⁵¹

Here there is no recognition of the fact that Irish land is being confiscated on the pretext of agricultural improvement while the natives are being forced onto stony ground and hunted

down in a manner that made mobile and fluid farming methods essential. The ‘horried indignation’ invoked by Macrory seldom extended to the harrowing treatment of humans.

Restoration Horseplay

Inevitably, creative writers found in the practice of ploughing by the tail a rich metaphorical resource. J. O. Bartley’s celebrated study of dramatic depictions of Celtic figures, however, asserts that ‘the Irish practice of attaching the plough to the horse’s tail...is not mentioned in drama before *Love and a Bottle*.’⁵² Bartley’s allusion is to an exchange in George Farquhar’s restoration comedy between Pamphlet the bookseller and Lyric the poet:

Faith, I have often wonder’d how your Muse cou’d take such flights, yoa’d to such a
Cartload as she is.

Oh, they are like the Irish Horses, they draw best by the Tail.⁵³

Bartley refers in the same passage to John Michelborne’s play about the Siege of Derry, *Ireland Preserved*, where Irish colonel Sir Neil defiantly declares:

Your English customs shall no more prevail,

And Gads instead of Ropes do never fail,

*Our horses shall again plow by the tail.*⁵⁴

Horses appeared onstage, as themselves and as metaphors.⁵⁵ Horse racing was, like theatre, associated with nefarious activities, and periodically outlawed.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, an Irish dramatist penned ‘the first racing play on record.’ While providing entertainment for Wentworth at the St Werburgh Street Theatre in Dublin in the late 1630s, James Shirley

published his 1632 London horseracing comedy, *Hide Parke*, featuring a race between English and Irish footmen.⁵⁷ In *A strange horse-race* (1613) Thomas Dekker offers an aside on the Irish reputation for being fleet-footed: 'I thinke the wilde Irish are best at it in these latter times.'⁵⁸ According to Kevin De Ornellas: 'Tropings of the horse in early modern culture...nearly always engage with human society.' But never mind 'horse-based metaphors' and 'equine allusions'--what about actual horses?⁵⁹

Animal Historians

What do animal historians make of ploughing by the tail? Links between empire and animal welfare are bound up with competing colonial discourses of cruelty and concern. As Kathryn Shevelow remarks in *For the Love of Animals*, 'Protestant landowners despised their tenant farmers as savages – or as animals.' Linda Kalof sees the 1635 act as part of 'the new sentimentality toward animals.'⁶⁰ Other experts in the field discern expropriation and dehumanisation of native communities based on human warfare rather than animal welfare.⁶¹ Colonialism and religion combined to produce a discourse specific to planter communities. As Robert Watson observes, 'the legal history of animal protection suggests a strong Protestant tendency.' Robert Boyle, for example, 'performed animal dissection from the late 1640s when he was barely twenty years old,' yet 'gratuitous suffering of animals was, in Boyle's understanding, a blasphemy.'⁶²

For Keith Thomas, 'The same element of self-interest runs through all the legislation against animal cruelty...And it underlay attempts in the same period to prohibit the Irish practice of yoking horses to the plough by their tails.' Thomas puts English concern in context: 'England was proverbially a hell for horses and...many were literally ridden to death.'⁶³ Clearly, England was not a nation of animal lovers. According to Piers Beirne's trailblazing work on this topic, Wentworth's act 'had little or nothing to do with its

self-stated intent to protect horses from cruelty and was, instead, much more connected with the dominance of English nationalism and culture and the pursuit of private profit.’⁶⁴ Beirne reminds us ‘the object of anti-cruelty legislation is not always the welfare of animals,’ and suggests Wentworth’s act ‘was one small weapon among many forcefully used by the English to impose their cultural norms (on animal husbandry, on the ideal war horse, on efficient horse furniture and so on) and their search for economic profit, and to extirpate the backward customs of the barbaric Irish.’⁶⁵

‘Against old-fashioned teleological and Whiggish accounts of the history of anti-cruelty legislation,’ Beirne sees ‘an urgent need...for new...postcolonial histories of anti-cruelty legislation from the late eighteenth century to the present.’⁶⁶ In an Irish context – a colonial context – it is vital to view attitudes to animals alongside attitudes to natives since not only can concern for livestock sit comfortably with cruelty to human communities, but often customs condemned by colonists are decontextualized in order to be characterized as barbaric.

Romantic Ireland

Ploughing by the tail also surfaced in Irish fiction. In Lady Morgan’s *The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys* (1827), Trinity College Dublin student Murrough O’Brien receives a breathless letter from aunts Mable and Monica, ‘The Miss Mac Taffes,’ who ‘spelled as they spoke,’ urging him to come home, and decrying ‘them mushrooms and Williamites’ who declare that ‘it’s a barbarous custom, ploughing, harrowing, and drawing horses, garans, and colts by the tail, after th’ ould Connaught fashion, ‘whereby...the breed of horses is impoverished in the county,’ and such like talk; as if none ever ploughed, till the new undertakers of Moycullen came among us.’⁶⁷

According to Helen O'Connell, Morgan 'associates "the barbarous custom" ...with backward agriculture and the consequent development of "impoverished" breeds of Irish horses,' but the novel's treatment of the practice is more subtle because it ties the attack on Irish customs to plantation and expropriation, and the wording of Wentworth's act is invoked for the purposes of mockery.⁶⁸ Likewise, in Maria Edgeworth's novel *Ormond* (1833), Sir Ulick O'Shane commends his cousin Cornelius on 'the economy of your ploughing tackle,' before adding, 'Tis a pity you don't continue the old Irish style of ploughing by the tail,' to which 'Corny' replies, 'That is against humanity to brute *bastes*, which, without any sickening palaver of sentiment, I practise. Also, it's against an act of parliament...which, the way you parliament gentlemen draw them up, is not always particularly intelligible to plain common sense.'⁶⁹ Here, animal welfare is detached from 'any sickening palaver of sentiment' and from legislation worded to confound.

Enlightenment and After

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century perspectives accompanied developments in antiquarianism, husbandry and travel writing, but these developments were not necessarily advances, since while some scholars and visitors adopted a neutral tone, others simply regurgitated the colonial prejudice. In *A Tour of Ireland* (1780), agricultural reformer Arthur Young foregrounded the practice as a perennial feature of the Irish landscape:

Here let it be remarked, that *they very commonly plough and harrow with their horses*
DRAWING BY THE TAIL: it is done every season. Nothing can put them beside
this, and they insist that, take a horse tired in traces, and put him to work by the tail,
he will draw better: quite fresh again. Indignant reader! this is no jest of mine, but
cruel, stubborn, barbarous truth. It is so all over Cavan.⁷⁰

Young's terms – 'cruel, stubborn, barbarous' – exemplify the high-handed moral attitude to the ploughing by the tail. This went hand-in-hand with an approach more neutral in tone that stressed the antiquity of the practice. In *The Antiquities of Ireland* (1804) Edward Ledwich observes:

Our manner of plowing Cambrensis does not describe; it certainly was by the tail, and is as yet practised in remote parts....Probably the custom was introduced by the Picts, for it prevails in the Northern parts of Scotland.⁷¹

This not only reflects the urge at the time to search for origins, but also the recognition of common geological terrain in the north of Ireland and Scotland.

But the charge of barbarism persisted. Looking back on the Wentworth's 1635 Act, Thomas Dunham Whitaker offers a footnote: 'the whole enumeration proves that the common people must have been cruel, mischievous, and filthy in the highest degree.'⁷² Thomas Wood calls it a law 'enacted...for the civilization of the Irish...such as would be naturally expected for the improvement of any barbarous country.'⁷³ John Barrow's travelogue of 1836 declares that 'travelling in Ireland has no doubt wonderfully improved of late years,' as he expressed relief that the 'horrid practice of ploughing by the tail' has passed into history. Reviewing Barrow's book, Tim Bobbin mocks this passage: 'We certainly should feel much obliged to our author for thus making known our improvements in travelling, as well as our advancement in civilization!'⁷⁴ Rather than concurring with Barrow that progress has been achieved, this sarcastic comment by Bobbin takes aim at the patronising tone of a man his *DNB* entry describes as '[a]n ardent imperialist.'

John Stuart Mill's 1838 critique of Jeremy Bentham invoked the act as emblematic of piecemeal reform in legal history. While this of course reflects a very nineteenth-century historical and legal context, at the same time that it continues the rhetoric of John Davies (law = civilizing), the trope served Mill's present-day purposes and drew on a geological metaphor – 'irregularity of strata' – relevant to the agricultural practice invoked:

In the English law...the adaptations of barbarous laws to the growth of civilised society were made chiefly by stealth...The result of this mode of improving social institutions was ...the laws were improved with much the same effect as if, in the improvement of agriculture...the primeval practice of ploughing by the horse's tail gave way to the innovation of harness, the tail, for form's sake, had still remained attached to the plough.⁷⁵

Piers Beirne cites an earlier instance of Mill's use of the practice in a speech at the London Debating Society. There, Mill declares: 'The Irish, who had always been in the habit of tying the plough to the horse's tail, regarded the very idea of employing harness with horror.'⁷⁶

Caesar Otway spoke archly of 'the custom of making horses draw by the tail, which certainly is not only ancient but economical, for it saves all manner of tackle, except the hair of the animal.'⁷⁷ The implication here is that poverty underpins the practice, reflecting a kind of utilitarianism, but this remark refuses to engage with the colonial context of insecure land tenure, the light breed of horses, or the obdurate nature of the soil. The practice had a prehistory that also engaged agriculturally-minded writers. John Langdon mentions 'A possible example of a horse ploughing by the tail in prehistoric Sweden (i.e., from a rock carving).'⁷⁸ James Allen Ransome, for example, declared that 'our Saxon forefathers were wont to fasten their horses to the plough by the tail; a barbarous custom... formerly practised

in Ireland to such an extent that the legislature in 1634 found it necessary to interfere.’⁷⁹

Picking up on Ransome, Sarah Tomlinson rehearses primitive ploughing methods in other countries, claiming the English method owes its civility to the Romans, whose taxes spurred economic improvement, providing a great advertisement for colonialism.⁸⁰

George Nicholls, in *A History of the Irish Poor Law* (1856), offers a nuanced reading of the legislation. His position as commissioner influences his words, which serve the purpose of providing a brief contextual grounding for the practice in which objective analysis or the laying out of possible reasons supplants moralizing, ridicule and abuse:

These Acts certainly indicate ... rude and barbarous practices in some parts of Ireland – so rude...one finds some difficulty in giving credence to them; ... but how far this backwardness was owing to ‘a natural lazie disposition’ in the Irish tenantry, or whether it was the ‘better to enable them to be flitting from their lands to deceive their landlords of their rents’...or occasioned by the oppressive conduct of the landlords... is impossible to say ... Most likely all these causes were in operation.⁸¹

John O’Donovan is one commentator who ‘finds some difficulty in giving credence’:

What ‘ploughing by the tail’ actually means, none of our writers have as yet cleared up....I hold it impossible that they could drag the plough through the land, if yoked to their tails only...but the subject has not received that degree of historic and scientific investigation which it deserves.⁸²

O'Donovan set great store by the 'historic and scientific' and their application to Ireland's customs and past. Here, rather than investigate the grounds of the practice, O'Donovan invokes scientific proof as a challenge to its very existence.

Antiquarian Notes & Queries

O'Donovan's scepticism was shared. A one-line query in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* in 1855 – 'Is it the fact that at one period the Ulster Irish, in ploughing, fastened the plough to the horse's tail?'⁸³ – elicited a flurry of responses, including this enlightening answer:

There is no doubt that this was at one time actually a common practice in Ireland; but ploughing, in those days, was a very different thing from what it is now. The old plough was a slightly made wooden implement, with a stone plough-share, and only calculated to scratch the surface of the ground.⁸⁴

This last remark reflects emerging archaeological knowledge. The *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, founded in 1853, was at the leading-edge with excavation reports and a materially evidenced approach to antiquarianism. Another respondent observed:

In 1642, Sir George Hamilton, ancestor to the Marquis of Abercorn, had a grant for life of all the penalties accruing to the Crown under this act. Did the Merry Monarch intend this as a joke? or is it possible that the penalties under the act in question could have been of any considerable value?⁸⁵

We know such fines were fruitful and that this was no joke.⁸⁶ The incredulity here feels forced, and fits with efforts to ridicule rather than look for reasons. A later respondent, ‘Cuthbert Bede’ (pseudonym of English novelist Edward Bradley), takes a more historicist approach, suggesting that horsehair extensions were crucial to the practice:

Harrowing, if not ploughing, by the horse’s tail was practised at a more recent date than 1649, both in Ireland and in the Scottish Highlands. This, at any rate, is the testimony of Capt. Burt in 1754, and since then of the author of *Paddiana*, and also of Lord George Hill, in his *Facts from Gweedore*. The horse’s tail would seem to have been tied to the harrow without the further aid of harness or ropes; and when the tail had become too much docked for the work, it was artificially lengthened by twisted sticks.⁸⁷

Here one sees the coming together of strands of agricultural, antiquarian and historicist approaches, but the tendency to hark back to unexamined colonial condemnation proved hard to shake off. Other commentators cited the relevant article of peace from 1649 which ‘drew forth from Milton a severe remark,’ referencing the poet’s observation, or noted the practice’s persistence in mid-nineteenth century Cavan.⁸⁸ J. R. Haig offered a comparative perspective:

In Caithness and Sutherland...they always ploughed by attaching the plough, a wooden one-stilted thing, to the horse’s tail. Ropes were made of twisted rushes which, though they did not last long, were cheap.⁸⁹

This adds economy and improvisation to geology and breed of horse as a way of rationalising the practice.

Later critics picked up on Dineley's identification of stony soil as key to the practice, sometimes entwined with an acknowledgement that straitened circumstances played a part too. Michael Duignan, in his study of 'Irish Agriculture in Early Historic Times,' links the Irish breed of light horses to the practice of harrowing without harness in a way that suggests ploughing in the English manner would have been the crueller custom:

the Irish horse of the period was a very light animal indeed, no bigger than a pony of the Connemara or Antrim type...horses could not profitably be harnessed to a plough prior to the adoption of the stiff horse-collar which rests on the shoulders. [...] The older type of collar...was of soft leather and worn in such a way that it pressed on the trachean artery and hindered the horse's breathing....Incidentally we may have here the ultimate explanation of the alleged Irish custom of ploughing by the horse's tail.⁹⁰

We are back here with Blundeville, Payne and Markham and the recognition of the lightness of Irish horses. Writing in 1955, Bernard O'Daly commented:

The practice was defended by its advocates on the ground that, to avoid hurting themselves, the horses stopped instantly whenever the soc of the plough struck against anything solid. [...] In Ulster, at least, the people generally were too poor to buy either ploughs or harness, and took the view that ploughing was bad for the soil.⁹¹

Other observers, noting its persistence in Ulster, neglected to dig deeper. Harold Masterson remarked: 'The English attempted to abolish this practice by imposing fines, but in Fermanagh it took them a century and a half to do so completely.'⁹² Taking a cross-section, what we find in critical responses to ploughing by the tail is 'irregularity of strata.' Some

seek to understand through scholarly excavation; others accept the 1635 act as fair and final judgement. While it would be tempting to see the persistence of ploughing by the tail as a form of obstinate cultural resistance or native stubbornness, the arguments of agriculturalists assure us that the practice had its advantages, suited as it was to the nature of the soil and the breed of horse.

From Antiquarianism to Ethnology

Within ethnology, ploughing by the tail has a vexed history.⁹³ Citing a 1943 essay in *The Irish Book Lover* by J. J. McAuliffe, Emyr Estyn Evans bemoaned Irish defensiveness:

A striking example of Irish sensitivity and ingenuity is the denial, against all the evidence, that the practice ever existed...that the English invented this Irish vice and that the sole purpose of the laws passed against it since the seventeenth century was to prove that it must have existed. In fact the custom was not so barbarous as might be thought.⁹⁴

Evans seeks to replace denial, which he sees as bound up with nationalist narratives, with understanding. His point is that English representations of the practice as barbarous have prompted some Irish commentators to refute its existence, which paradoxically places them on the same side as those who condemn the practice as beyond the pale. Evans's own strategy is to understand more and condemn less.

Revisiting the topic in a subsequent defence of the continuing relevance of 'human geography, ethnology, and social anthropology' to Irish history, Evans neither flinched from exacting scrutiny nor accepted the colonial context as the whole story: 'It is fatally easy to blame the poverty of folk artifacts on landlordism, and to scorn them instead of describing

them.’ Interestingly, using the ploughing-tail as part of a revisionist debate shows the flexibility of the trope toward different polemical purposes. Evans’ revisionist agenda entails a corrective approach to Irish nationalist historiography: ‘Some patriotic Irish writers have denied that it was ever practised, just as they have hotly denied the well-known marital infidelities of some of their political heroes.’ These patriotic writers, Evans wryly notes, not only deny the practice but maintain ‘the English also invented the Gaelic term for it.’ Evans insists that ‘it is also clear from the early literature that horses were occasionally used in pre-Norman Ireland, and if the implements they pulled were light the tail would have been the most efficient and even perhaps the most humane form of traction.’ Such a practice was ‘simple and capable of only scratching the surface.’ Evans argues that ‘while poverty provides the easiest explanation, there were probably practical advantages and possibly – in the beginning – ritual reasons for a practice that should be regarded as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a mark of disgrace, something to be forgotten or even denied.’ He concludes: ‘So late as 1938, in Donegal, I spoke to a man who told me that the tail was secured by a difficult knot which in his youth only a few men knew.’

In a note tucked away at the back of his essay, Evans adds something germane to this whole debate:

One explanation ... is that in glacial soils where the plough might strike a hidden boulder, the tail-tied horse would immediately stop if this happened, whereas plough, horse and ploughman might suffer harm if the horse had no such immediate warning. Cultural as well as political opposition to the English planters may be seen in the complaints of their Irish tenants in the early seventeenth century that they did not like their animals ‘loaded by English horse-collars.’⁹⁵

Again, here is the claim that the aversion to English horse collars was based on the light breed of Irish horses, unsuitable to heavy harnesses.

Social anthropologist May McCann, reviewing *Folk and Farm*, in which Evans' essay appeared, commented: 'The example of ploughing by the tail must be viewed in the light of the wider problem of the slow acceptance of ... folk life studies in Ireland by scholars and others whose attitudes ... led people to prefer to believe that the Irish did not employ this technique of ploughing because it seemed degrading and a slight on the Irish nation.'⁹⁶ Likewise, anthropologist Eugenia Shanklin, reflecting on Evans' intervention, remarks: 'This kind of reasoning is the quintessence of Irish thinking about tradition.'⁹⁷

Locking horns with Nicholas Canny's landmark essay 'Migration and Opportunity,' Raymond Gillespie questioned 'the criteria used to measure comparative development': 'Ploughing by the tail... was taken up by settlers in Ulster, not because they did not know any better, as Canny implies, but rather because it was a technique well suited to stony Ulster soil.'⁹⁸ The very ground itself is obdurate (*OED*: 'hardened'). Surveying Irish agricultural history, Cormac Ó Gráda was bemused by Gillespie's rejection of 'the implicit claim that the immigrants had nothing to learn from native techniques, drawing attention to how Ulster planters copied the native method of ploughing by the tail ...!'⁹⁹ Ó Gráda's exclamation is disingenuous insofar as he has seen how Gillespie situates the practice but chooses merely to sensationalize it himself. Gillespie furnishes the relevant context, bound up with the environmental conditions – the soil – of Ireland. That factor, the environment, is also linked to the type of land that natives were compelled to farm and with a context of conflict. As Clodagh Tait recently remarked, 'decisions about the alteration of farming methods and the adoption of new crops such as potatoes were made by cottiers partly in response to troubled times.'¹⁰⁰ The relationship between political conflict and fluid farming practices was known

in the seventeenth century. Gervase Markham recognized that special methods of tillage and storage were ‘much in vse in Ireland and other Countries where warre rageth.’¹⁰¹

Brian Smith, in *The Horse in Ireland* (1991), supports Gillespie’s view: ‘There were substantial reasons for ploughing...in what was called by English writers “the Irish manner,” since much of the country where the practice occurred was hilly and the ground stony.’¹⁰² The earth’s obduracy is countered by expert husbandry, and this aspect of ingenuity is captured beautifully in a poem by Michael Longley:

Whoever plucks wool in thrifty skeins from his sheep [...]
Is likely to do without a halter and reins
And plough by the tail, if the hairs are strong enough
And he has learned to tie the complicated knot.¹⁰³

Paul Muldoon’s poetic response, ‘Hinge,’ presents Longley and himself as bards versed in local lore, ‘never losing sight of what was meant/ by “ploughing by the tail”, or the workings of some far-flung farm-implement.’¹⁰⁴

Tailpiece

When William Hamilton Drummond, Larne-born Unitarian Minister and Honorary Member of the Belfast Natural History Society published *The Rights of Animals* (1838)¹⁰⁵ he chose an epigraph from *Paradise Lost*:

Is not the earth
With various living creatures, and the air
Replenished, and all these at thy command

To come and play before thee? Know'st thou not
Their language and their ways? They also know
And reason not contemptibly; with these
Find pastime and bear rule; thy realm is large.

Paradise Lost, viii. 369-375.

The enslavement of animals for 'pastime and...rule' is bound up with the enslavement of people. From Milton to Muldoon, ploughing by the tail is a practice that the topsoil of traditional scholarship serves to conceal. Horses remain crucial to Irish history.¹⁰⁶

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³ Guy Beiner, 'Recycling the Dustbin of Irish History: The Radical Challenge of "Folk Memory,"' *History Ireland* 14, 1 (2006): 42-47. See also the essay in this volume by Sarah Covington.

⁴ The 2018 *Cambridge History of Ireland*, volume 2, does include some folkloric material in Clodagh Tait's essay. See Clodagh Tait, 'Society, 1550-1700,' in Jane Ohlmeyer (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Ireland. Vol. 2, 1550-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁵ Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968; updated edition, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2001), p. 659.

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- ¹⁴ Evelyn Philip Shirley, Robert O'Brien and James Graves, 'Extracts from the Journal of Thomas Dineley, Esquire, Giving Some Account of His Visit to Ireland in the Reign of Charles II (Continued),' *The Journal of the Kilkenny and South-East of Ireland Archaeological Society* 6, 1 (1867), pp. 191-2, n. 24.
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scattering the seed on the untilled ground prior to ploughing.’ Idem, 220, emphasis in original. Pinkerton is the sole source mentioned by the most recent editors of Milton’s *Observations*. N. H. Keeble and Nicholas McDowell (eds.), *Complete Works of John Milton Vol. VI: Vernacular Regicide and Republican Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013), p. 212.

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